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The Meeting House

of the

First Church of Christ in New Haven

Center Church

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New Haven, Conn. First Church of Christ

The First Church of Christ in New Haven

CENTER CHURCH

Center Church is the oldest religious organization in New Haven. On the 15th of April, 1638, a company of English people under the leadership of Theophilus Eaton and the Reverend John Davenport landed at Quinnipiac and assembled for public worship, and from that time on continued to worship God as a Christian assembly. In the words of Mr. Davenport, the main purpose of these pioneers was "to found a plantation whose design was religion." The formal organization of the church was completed on the 22d of August, 1639, and since then the stated services have been carried on without interruption on the New Haven Green. The colony was a theocracy or "church-state," and out of the church sprang the civil government of the colony, only church members being permitted to vote. This plan prevailed until the union of New Haven with Connecticut Colony in 1664. After the abolition of the theocracy conditions were reversed and this church, in common with other Congregational societies of the Connecticut Colony, became dependent upon the civil government, the ministers being supported by an ecclesiastical rate or tax levied upon all the inhabitants. With various modifications this form of establishment continued until the present constitution of Connecticut was adopted in 1817, when the church was definitely disestablished. The Society of this church, however, still possesses the power of taxing its members, although this power has not been invoked for many years.

The Former Meeting Houses.

The first Meeting House of this church was built in 1640, and was, as drawings show, a rude structure of logs with a look-out for soldiers. In 1670 a new building was erected which lasted until 1757 when a brick structure was built, which gave way in 1812 to the present edifice.

The Present Meeting House.

The present Meeting House, which is the fourth to occupy this spot, was begun in 1812 and dedicated December 27, 1814. It was erected under the supervision of a committee of "contractors," chosen by the First Ecclesiastical Society, who reimbursed themselves out of the salvage of materials from the old church and by the sale of pews. The architect and builder was Ithiel Town, who took as his model the church of St. Martin's-in-the-fields, Trafalgar Square, London. The country was at war with England while the church was being built, and the timbers for the new structure could be brought to New Haven harbor only by special permission of the commander of the British blockading squadron.

The three churches at present on the New Haven Green, all built at about the same time, are probably the earliest instance in the United States of collective planning. Center Church is considered by architects to be an outstanding specimen of the Classic design which is so characteristic of the Georgian period of New England architecture.

The Pulpit Window.

The stained glass window over the pulpit pictures the story of the first sermon in the wilderness of New Haven, or Quinnipiac. The ship Hector, which brought the New Haven colonists from Boston, where they had spent the winter of 1637-38, dropped anchor on Saturday, April 14, (old style) 1638. On the following day the colonists landed at a spot now marked by a tablet at the corner of College and George streets, where there was then a tidal creek, and under the spreading branches of an oak held a service of worship, the Reverend John Davenport preaching to them from Matthew iv:i on the temptation in the wilderness. The armed men, the women and children ready to share the perils and hardships of the new settlement symbolize the mingled devotion and warfare which characterized the New England settler's life. At the base, the seven-branched candlestick and the seven-columns symbolize the "famous seven pillars" who were chosen in 1639 as the original members of the church in New Haven. They were Theophilus Eaton, John Davenport, Robert Newman, Nathaniel Gilbert, Thomas Fugill, John Punderson and Jeremiah Dixon.

THE FIRST MEETING HOUSE, 1640

This beautiful window is the gift of the late E. Hayes Trowbridge, in memory of his father, Ezekiel Hayes Trowbridge, a descendent of one of the founders of the church.

The Memorial Tablets.

On the walls of the auditorium the Ecclesiastical Society has erected tablets to the memory of the first ten pastors of the church. Beginning at the right hand side of the pulpit as one faces it and proceeding along the north wall of the church, the inscriptions which are not in chronological sequence, are as follows:

THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS.

JOHN DAVENPORT, B. D. (Oxon 1625)

Born in Coventry, Warwickshire, April 1597. Vicar of St. Stephen's, Coleman Street, London, 1624. Fled to America for Religious Freedom 1637. Laid the Foundations of New Haven, April 1638. Pastor of this Church from its formation, 1639, until his removal to the First Church, Boston, 1668. Died in Boston, March, 1670.

NATHANIEL WILLIAM TAYLOR

1786-1858

Pastor of this Church 1812-1822. Professor of Theology in Yale College 1822-1858. As Pastor faithful to his Master and beloved by his people. As Preacher of the everlasting Gospel bold, fervent and successful. As Student and Teacher of Christian Theology pre-eminent in his Generation.

CHAUNCEY WHITTLESEY.

A graduate of and instructor in Yale College, a member of the Colonial Assembly and in other Public Trusts from 1738 to 1756. Fifth Pastor of this Church from 1758 to 1787.

His Piety and Eloquence made him dear to his people, and with his Firmness and Decision enabled him to discharge the duties of the pastoral office with fidelity and dignity during the struggle of the Revolution. He died July 24th, 1787, in the 70th year of his age and the 30th of his ministry.

His remains rest in the crypt of this Church.

TO THE MEMORY OF

JOSEPH NOYES,

born in Stonington, Oct. 16, 1688. Died June 14, 1761. Graduate of and an instructor in Yale College. Pastor of this First Church 1716-1761. His Ministry was marked by ecclesiastical controversies, and by social and political changes which led to the formation of a second Church, the establishment of a separate worship in Yale College and the organization of an Episcopal Church.

By his sagacity and prudence he retained to old age the confidence and affection of those who remained faithful to this, the Mother Church.

His remains rest beneath this edifice.

IN MEMORY OF

REV. JAMES DANA, D. D.

Born in Cambridge, Mass., May 10, 1735. Harvard College, 1753. Pastor of the Congregational Church, Wallingford, Conn., 1758-78. Sixth Pastor of the First Church, New Haven, 1789-1805. Fellow of Yale College, 1789-1812.

Faithful to his convictions of Duty, earnest in their defence in an age of controversy, but with charity to all. Died in New Haven, August 18th, 1812, Age 77 years.

Beginning at the left hand side of the pulpit as one faces it and proceeding along the south wall of the church, the inscriptions are as follows:

PIE REPONE TE

JAMES PIERPONT

Born at Roxbury, Mass., Jany. 4th, 1659, a graduate of Harvard College in 1681, was ordained pastor of this church, July 2, 1685, and having ministered faithfully here 30 years, died Novbr. 22nd, 1714, and is buried beneath this edifice. He was one of the founders of Yale College.

His gracious gifts of fervent piety, persuasive eloquence and winning manners were devoutly spent in the service of his Lord and Master.

BY THE GRACE OF GOD

LEONARD BACON,

a servant of Jesus Christ and of all men for His sake, here preached the Gospel for fifty-seven years. Fearing God and having no fear beside, loving righteousness and hating iniquity, friend of Liberty and law, helper of Christian missions, teacher of teachers, promoter of every good work, he blessed the City and the Nation by ceaseless labors and a holy life, and departed peacefully into rest, December 24, 1881, leaving the world better for his having lived in it.

NICHOLAS STREET.

Second Pastor of this Church. Born in Somersetshire, England, in 1603, a graduate of Oxford University in 1625. Pastor of the Church in Taunton, Mass., 1637 to 1657. Associated with Rev. John Davenport as Teacher in this Church, Sept. 26th, 1659 to April, 1668, and then Pastor until his death, April 22nd, 1674.

He was a Godly, Modest and judicious Man, and the first Pastor who died in the service of this Church.

IN MEMORY OF

MOSES STUART

Beloved as a Pastor, Honored as a Teacher, Eminent as a Scholar. Born at Wilton, Conn., 1780. Graduated at Yale College, 1799. Pastor of this Church, 1806-1810. Professor of Sacred Literature in the Theological Seminary, Andover, Mass., 1810-1848. Died in 1852.

IN MEMORIAM

WILLIAM HOOKE

Born in Southampton, England, 1601. B. A. Trinity College, Oxford, 1620. Teacher of this Church, 1644-1656.

Chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and Master of the Savoy Hospital till the close of the Commonwealth.

He died March 21, 1678. His remains rest in Bunhill Fields, London.

The tablet on the east wall of the auditorium, to the right as one faces the central door, was erected by the Society to the memory of Captain Harold Ludington Hemingway, a member of this church and a gallant soldier, who was mortally wounded while caring for his men and died in Glorieux Hospital, near Verdun, France, October 21, 1918.

On the north wall of the central vestibule is a tablet to the memory of Ithiel Town, architect and builder of this Meeting House. Facing it is the Honor Roll of members of this congregation who served in the World War.

The tablets on the west wall of the central vestibule, as one faces the inner doors, bear the names of the persons, one hundred and thirty-nine in number, whose remains are interred in the Crypt.

In the north vestibule a tablet gives the names of the ministers who have been installed into the pastoral office of this church down to the present time.

The Crypt.

The ground covered by this Meeting House is a portion of the original burying place of New Haven, used from 1638 to 1821. When the present edifice was begun in 1812, space for the enlarged building could be obtained only by enclosing a part of the old churchyard containing one hundred and thirty-nine graves that clustered around the older building. After prolonged negotiations, permission to take this step was obtained from the General Court, the First Ecclesiastical Society covenanting to preserve the graves so covered, with decency and respect.

THE SECOND MEETING HOUSE, 1670

The oldest stone in the crypt marks the grave of Mrs. Sarah Trowbridge, deceased January 5th, 1687, age 46. The latest burial, that of Mrs. Whittlesey, widow of the Rev. Chauncey Whittlesey, took place in 1812, evidently just before ground was broken for the new church. Toward the south wall lie the grandfather and grandmother of President Hayes. Close to these is the grave of Mrs. Margaret Arnold, the first wife of Benedict Arnold, who died, happily, before her husband deserted the colonial cause. The comprehensive inscription on the monument of Judge Jared Ingersoll, twice Agent for Connecticut at the Court of Great Britain, is a masterpiece of epitaphian style.

Three of the early pastors of the church are buried in the crypt: Pierpont, father-in-law of Jonathan Edwards, Noyes and Whittlesey. On Pierpont's monument there is also an inscription in memory of Mary, his third wife. She was the daughter of Thomas Hooker, the founder of Hartford, and the mother of Mrs. Jonathan Edwards. John Davenport is not buried in this crypt. Disheartened at the abolition of the theocracy in 1654, when New Haven was merged into Connecticut Colony, he accepted a call to the First Church in Boston in 1668. He died in 1670, and his remains rest in the Burial Ground of the King's Chapel in that city.

THE THIRD MEETING HOUSE, 1757

The crypt contains the modest grave of Mrs. Hester Coster, deceased April ye 6th, 1691, aged 67. She owned the lot now occupied by Osborne Hall and left it in her will "to the First Church of Christ in New Haven, to be improved toward the maintaining of a lecture in New Haven in the spring and fall of the year." In 1717 the church sold it

to the "trustees, partners and undertakers for the Collegiate School," and the acquisition of this parcel of land together with the "Hooke lot," on the south west corner of College and Chapel streets left to the church by the Rev. William Hooke upon his return to England, was the inducement which located Yale in New Haven, rather than in Wethersfield or Saybrook.

The Monuments in the Rear of the Church.

Near the southwest foundation wall of the church, marked by a tablet, lie the remains of Theophilus Eaton, the principal founder and the first Governor of New Haven Colony, who died January 7, 1657. The monument which formerly marked his grave has been removed to the Grove Street Cemetery. On the corresponding north-west corner is a tablet to the memory of Stephen Goodyear, the first Deputy Governor of the Colony and one of the earliest members of this church. He died in London in 1658 and is buried there.

Between these tablets, in a separate enclosure, is a monument to the memory of John Dixwell, who lived in New Haven for several years under the name of James Davids. After his death it became known that he was John Dixwell, one of the judges of the High Court which condemned to death Charles I of England. The inscription on the original headstone has been well nigh obliterated by the elements, but the larger monument gives in concise form the main facts of his career.

(North Face)

J. D. Esq.
Deceased March ye 18th in ye 82d
year of his age, 1688-9.

(West Face)

HERE REST THE REMAINS OF
JOHN DIXWELL, Esq.,

of the Priory of Folkstone, in the County of Kent, England. Of a family long prominent in Kent and Warwickshire, and himself possessing large estates and much influence in his county, he espoused the popular cause in the revolution of 1640. Between 1610 and 1660 he was Colonel in the Army, an active member of four Parliaments, thrice on the Council of State, and one of the High Court which tried and condemned King Charles the first. At the restoration of the monarchy he was compelled to leave this country; and, after a brief residence in Germany came to New Haven, and here lived in seclusion, but enjoying the esteem and friendship of its most worthy citizens till his death in 1688-9.

(South Face)

The Dixwell coat of arms with the motto
"Esse quam videri."

(East Face)

JOHN DIXWELL

a zealous patriot, a sincere Christian, and honest man, he was faithful to duty through good and through evil report, and having lost fortune, position and home, in the cause of his country and of human rights, found shelter and sympathy here among the fathers of New England. His descendants have erected this monument as a tribute of respect to his memory and as a grateful record of the generous protection extended to him by the early inhabitants of New Haven.

In 1821 the graves which remained outside the space enclosed by the foundations of the Meeting House were levelled and the monuments and headstones removed to Grove Street Cemetery. Near the flagstaff on the Green lie the remains of Isaac Allerton, William Brewster's son-in-law, who was a member of the Mayflower company and who removed to New Haven from Plymouth and became a prosperous merchant.

Center Church and Yale.

Since the establishment of Yale in New Haven in 1716 until 1895, all commencements and inaugurations of presidents, besides many other academic ceremonies were held in the respective Meeting Houses of the First Society. Since 1895 the academic exercises have been held in the university buildings, but the commencement procession still marches through the Green, past Center Church, to the ringing of the bell.

The Memorial Organ.

The organ is in memory of Henry Farnam, the distinguished civil engineer who built the Farmington Canal and later the Rock Island Railroad, and of his wife Sophia Whitman Farnam. It was presented in 1913, by their children, Professor Henry Wolcott Farnam and Mrs. Eli Whitney.